Ungifted: Teacher Candidates' Understanding of Giftedness through Literature Circles

Sharryn Larsen Walker
Central Washington University, sharryn.walker@cwu.edu

Wendie Lappin Castillo
Central Washington University, wendie.castillo@cwu.edu

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When thinking about the term "gifted," high IQs and advanced courses almost immediately come to mind. However, children who qualify as being (sic) gifted display a number of different traits just as any other student would (sic).

This comment, made by a teacher candidate (TC) minoring in literacy, named aspects of students identified as gifted. This comment was made in a reflective essay after they participated in a literature circle focused on the novel *Ungifted* by Gordon Korman (2012) as part of a course in literacy assessment. While participating in literature circles over three weeks, they connected the topics of giftedness and assessment. The focus of this paper is to illuminate the TC's understandings and insights of giftedness through their participation in a literature circle.

Literature circles occur when small groups of readers discuss a piece of literature in depth (Campbell-Hill, et al., 1995). In this case, the use of literature circles provided the TCs with a vicarious experience of observing Donavan's life after he is mistakenly placed in his district's gifted program. Korman (2012) tells Donavan's story from multiple perspectives, including teachers, peers, family, and the district superintendent. The reader is exposed to the different perceptions of Donavan as he becomes more introspective. Observing as bystanders in Donavan's life, the TCs were able to interpret and reflect how giftedness played out through the story.

Use of Literature Circles in Higher Education

Literature circles have been widely used in elementary and secondary schools to increase reading comprehension, promote social-emotional development, and discourse processes (Campbell-Hill, et al., 1995). Chevalier and Houser (1997) employed literature circles to help preservice teachers empathize with a broader range of people from diverse backgrounds. Following personal reflections, the TCs met in small groups to share their new perspectives of themselves and their position within society. The authors found using multicultural novels promoted multicultural self-development. Although a substantial change in perspectives did not happen simultaneously for all members of the class, reading, discussing, and reflecting on multicultural novels heightened awareness, created dissonance, and modified sociocultural perspectives.

McCall (2010) cited the use of literature circles in a social studies methods course as a way for TCs to think more deeply about concepts, actively engage in discussions, and take on leadership roles within the groups. These TCs compared

different perspectives and reasoned why they thought the way they did. The instructor of the course was prepared to guide the discussions when important issues were not addressed.

Literature circles have also been used in undergraduate education, including science (Calmer & Straits, 2014); philosophy (Van Dyk, 2019); service-learning (Smagorinsky, et al., 2015); and literary theory (Hash, 2019). These authors cited directing the readers' attention to key ideas, inspiring readers to make connections between their ideas and course concepts, promoting individual responsibility within philosophical studies, discussing their conceptions of teaching culturally diverse populations, and observing how conversations change over time as course outcomes. In each of these studies, the authors noted that the participants came to a deeper understanding of course content and comparison of different perspectives.

Gifted Education

The TC in the opening reflection used the NAGC (https://www.nagc.org/) definition of gifted students to support their ideas about the traits and supports needed when teaching those identified as gifted. However, gifted instruction is not consistent across the United States. Through a meta-analysis, Kim (2016) suggested the types of programs and grade levels influenced the effect sizes of academic achievement and socioemotional development in gifted students. VanTassel-Baska and Brown (2007) examined various curriculum models for the gifted and suggested a set of criteria for effective implementation. Delcourt, et al. (2007) found there were differences in cognitive and affective development across program types and advised gifted program managers to continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their programs.

Although research findings support different types of gifted programs, specifics within programs need to be considered. Vidergor and Gordon (2015) found students, parents, and teachers were satisfied with the use of self-contained gifted classrooms. Gifted students appreciated being grouped with similarly leveled students who shared interests and a curious nature. Parents were satisfied with their decision to place their child in a separate classroom where the teacher could focus on the unique needs of gifted students.

Petersen and Lorimar (2012) deemed the inclusion of an affective curriculum, with a focus on social and emotional development as important when teaching Grades 5-8 gifted students. Over time, the teachers stated the importance of including an affective curriculum with gifted students as it impacted the depth of discussing social and emotional development. As such these teachers were better able to support gifted students when nonacademic problems occurred.

French, et al. (2011) suggested Grade 4-12 gifted students generally preferred working alone. Yet some were more inclined to work with others if they felt their work was valued by peers and teachers. This finding coupled with those highlighted in this section can provide better service in program implementation to those identified as gifted.

TCs' Perceptions of the Gifted

There is little research on TCs' perceptions of giftedness. However, using a metaphorical approach, Olthouse (2014) uncovered that TCs believed gifted students would be easy to identify because of their superior academic achievement. These TCs identified giftedness as an act of becoming and developing rather than as an uneven developmental process. They also identified intelligence as a general trait of giftedness. Additionally, TCs surmised gifted students were full of information, giftedness was rare, and gifted students were rapid learners. Further, Olthouse suggested TCs would be glad to teach gifted students while recognizing the need for them to learn at a rapid pace. Additionally, TCs can use metaphors of giftedness to reflect on their own beliefs and perceptions of this school population.

Reflection

Reflection is a hallmark of teacher education (Schön, 1987). Parkinson (2009) noted that TCs alter their perceptions of students through reflection. Because of this introspection, TCs ask questions about what they are learning and are more likely to take risks in their teaching (Grant, 2001). Walkington (2005) suggested teacher educators address professional dispositions, such as time to talk, time to reflect, identify effective and ineffective practices, and learn through research, with TCs to help them grow professionally. Through literature circles, participants can come to a deeper understanding of what they read as suggested by Walkington, and by sharing their thoughts with others (Campbell-Hill, et al., 1995). Additionally, as TCs reflect in written form, understandings of concepts become more complex.

Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the reflective comments made by TCs after they participated in weekly discussions about the tween novel *Ungifted* (Korman, 2012). Creswell and Poth (2017) defined phenomenological studies as those which analyze the human experience through the words and actions of the participants. Each TC used the content of the

discussions to write a reflective essay prompted by a set of questions about how the narrative of *Ungifted* connected to the course concepts of giftedness and literacy assessment. They reflected upon relevant issues related to those identified as gifted; new insights and perspectives they had about those identified as gifted; and implications for teaching. This framework provided a forum for TCs to reflect in a semi-structured manner where they applied their content knowledge through valuable connections with their peers. The TCs submitted their reflective essays to the online classroom management system within their literacy assessment course.

Context

The participants were enrolled in a literacy assessment course as part of their minor program at a rural Pacific Northwest university. These teacher candidates took the course in either the Winter quarters of 2017 (n=26), 2018 (n=12), or 2019 (n=22), and were Elementary Education, Early Childhood Education, English Education, or Special Education majors. As part of the course, the TCs participated in weekly literature circles over three weeks about the novel *Ungifted.* They kept their thoughts about their readings on sticky notes using the "stop and jot" strategy (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017) and used their notes to guide the literature circle discussions. During these discussions, the TCs first used a "brain drain" strategy (Calkins et al., 2012), where they spent time detailing what they remembered from the week's reading. After the group felt they had sufficiently remembered the details of the reading, they began to talk about their thoughts written on the sticky notes.

Each TC wrote a reflective essay targeted to the prompts about giftedness and assessment the week after the discussions were completed. To further guide the writing of the essay, each TC had access to the assignment's rubric. They submitted their reflections to the course electronic classroom from which the instructor evaluated them based upon the rubric. After the assignment grades were posted, each TC received a hard copy of the evaluated rubric. The reflective essays were archived in the electronic classroom in the various sections of the course.

Data Collection and Analysis

The TCs reflected on their understanding of giftedness and assessment by writing an essay in response to prompting questions, written by the course instructor. The prompts were:
1. What relevant issues of giftedness and assessment were evident in *Ungifted*?

2. *What new insights and perspectives of giftedness and assessment were discussed as a result of reading *Ungifted?*

3. What are the implications of the relevant issues and new insights and perspectives about giftedness and assessment to your future teaching?

After Winter Quarter of 2019 was completed, the authors obtained permission from the university's human subjects review board to collect and analyze the archived data. The second author accessed the 60 archived essays from the first author's electronic classroom. She removed all identifying markers and downloaded them to a thumb drive. Then, the first author used the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to highlight specific reflections based on each of the prompts at the initial analysis level. Once the initial level of analysis level was completed, the second author read and reread the data to provide feedback and verify the highlighted specifics.

The authors then read and reread the initial level of analysis, grouping topics and themes within each of the prompts. After several readings, the researchers categorized and coded the data, and then discussed the themes they identified (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Mills, 2011). Themes emerged regarding specific aspects of the relevant issues; new insights and perspectives; and implications for the teaching of the gifted. Because of the large amount of data collected, only the themes specific to giftedness are presented in the Findings section of this paper.

Findings

The TCs wrote a reflective essay as a culmination of their new knowledge about giftedness. Their responses in the essay were guided by three prompts. However, the prompts highlighted in this paper are:

1. What relevant issues of giftedness and assessment were evident in *Ungifted*?

2. What are the implications of the relevant issues and new insights and perspectives about giftedness and assessment to your future teaching?

Because the TCs were free to identify concepts within each of the prompts, some identified a thought as a relevant issue, while others described it as a new insight or implication. Therefore, the findings are presented in the order the prompts were listed in the reflective essay, beginning with the relevant issues. Duplications of a relevant issue in another section are noted, but not further analyzed. Also, because of the large amount of data collected, only the themes related to giftedness are presented in this set of findings.

Relevant Issues of Giftedness Evident in *Ungifted*

The TCs were asked to identify four relevant issues related to the portrayal of giftedness in *Ungifted.* Collectively, this prompt received the largest volume of ideas. The three broad themes identified as relevant issues were *giftedness*, *assessment of giftedness*, and *instruction of the gifted.*

Giftedness

As expected, the TCs cited giftedness as one of the relevant issues in the book. Within this theme, they described definitions and characteristics of giftedness; various viewpoints about giftedness; and the application of this knowledge.

      Definitions and Characteristics of Giftedness. Many of the TCs stated they did not have a clear definition of giftedness or the characteristics of those identified as gifted. Some found the definition of "gifted" to be very narrow, focusing only on the academic ability of the student. Others commented that giftedness can take on many forms, depending on the student and their ability. One TC stated the characteristics of an "individual's personality or measure of someone's life skills, emotional strength, or ability to love and form meaningful relationships" should be considered when describing the characteristics of giftedness.

      In this theme, the TCs wrote largely about the characteristics many identified as gifted possess. They acknowledged those identified as gifted have strengths and weaknesses, as all students do. One made a connection to the course text (Gipe, 2013) when they commented "Just as all students are not the same, all students have different areas of strengths and weaknesses, and assessments play a huge role in discovering the individuality of each student" (sic). They also stated those identified as gifted might have a hard time fitting in with others. To support this issue, a TC offered these portrayals from *Ungifted*:

> For example, Chloe, a student at the Academy, states, "We had a lot of talents in our homeroom. Normalcy wasn't one of them" (Korman, 2012, p. 36). Noah, another student at the Academy, wanted to go to Hardcastle Middle School, because "The students who went there laughed a lot. And when they weren't in the act of laughing, they seemed unpressured." (p. 102)

      This issue was expounded when it was noted the social and life skills of the gifted may not be at the same level as age peers. Gifted students may emulate Noah in the book who tries his best to fail at everything to appear more "normal." Yet, they also wondered whether Donavan was "gifted" in personal skills and if that should be an identifier, as opposed to considering only academics when qualifying those for gifted programs.

Viewpoints about Giftedness. Because Korman (2012) wrote *Ungifted* from multiple perspectives of the characters, the TCs analyzed how those identified as gifted are perceived by others. Regardless of the viewpoint taken, the TCs recognized labels, assumptions, and stereotypes were prevalent in each of the views. These factors created a stigma of being identified as gifted. One TC wrote, "At the Academy, it is even worse because these students are given labels such as "brainiacs." Another supported this situation when they wrote, "Chloe said, 'There's a price to being gifted. The cost is your life…Friends?... You're too busy for them, and they're too busy for you' (p. 32).

The characters in the book held strong viewpoints about themselves as "gifted." The TCs cited Noah as unchallenged; while Chloe showed herself to be too busy to be bothered with people. Donavan knows he is not gifted, but tries to fit in. His view of himself goes from extreme doubt of his abilities to the realization that he can be a good student if he applies himself. The TCs recognized when pushed to succeed, many students will rise to the challenge because "teacher expectation equals student achievement."

The teachers in the book had specific viewpoints of the gifted. The TCs were often dismayed that the teachers did not question the qualifying assessment, specifically in the case of Donavan. Rather than looking back at the data they had (or in Donavan's case, didn't have), the teachers accepted him into the program and then wondered why he was significantly underachieving. The following comment was similar amongst many of the TCs when they pondered this conundrum:

> Another issue that was addressed in the book was that most of the teachers and the administrators accepted the results of Donovan's test even though he was not performing well in school. This shows that a test does not tell you everything about a child, and that test results should not be the only piece of information teachers look at when evaluating a child's abilities. Just because Donovan "passed" the test, it does not necessarily mean he belonged in the gifted program (sic).

Because the TCs learned throughout their program "assessment drives instruction," they were dismayed by the teachers' lack of use of this principle. However, they surmised Korman (2012) may have included it as a tension point in the story.

Age and grade peers also have viewpoints of those identified as gifted. Because Korman (2012) examined Donavan's life from the perspectives of those with whom he interacted, the reader is invited to see him from multiple viewpoints. Chloe is skeptical of Donavan's "giftedness; Noah wants to learn how to act "normal;" while Abigail wants Donavan dismissed from the program. It appears the TCs had not thought about how peers might perceive someone who is

identified as gifted, yet they recognized having difficulty fitting into social groups as a characteristic of those identified as gifted.

Parents and families hold multiple views of their children, from wonder, in the case of Donavan's parents, to demanding, as Noah's parents are portrayed. Regardless of what the families thought, the TCs felt it was important to have parents and families involved in the education of the child, as parent involvement is important in academic achievement (Epstein, et al., 2002).

Regardless of the viewpoints, the TCs mentioned the importance of knowing one's students. Students should be viewed as "people," and look to what a student can do and what the student needs to work on next. They cited the importance of avoiding the stigma of labeling students and using multiple grouping patterns, such as small heterogeneous and academic groups in teaching. In this way, all students learn to work together. The examination of the multiple viewpoints helped to solidify the TCs' knowledge of these effective teaching practices.

Application of Knowledge about Giftedness. Because they learned about giftedness through the reading of *Ungifted* (Korma, 2012), the TCs wrote about how they might use this knowledge in their teaching. They shared broad guiding principles for their teaching. The TCs included creativity as a relevant issue in the application of their knowledge of giftedness. Many times, only the academic side of giftedness is what receives attention, while those who are creative may also be identified as gifted. The TCs became aware of this aspect of giftedness as one wrote:

> Additionally, it is easy to fall back on more traditional and recycled lessons and assessment techniques when it feels as though there is not enough time or energy to implement creativity or innovative ideas. And when this happens, we are doing a huge disservice to our students by losing sight of the 'fresh' perspectives we were all excited to enter our profession having.

Within the realm of creativity, the TCs cited those identified as gifted may have impressive talents with real-world applications when one stated, "[C]reativity and real-world application is essential because it keeps students engaged and it will be something they need once they enter into the workforce" (sic). Several cited this knowledge as helpful to better identify the strengths and areas for further instruction for all students. One TC noted, "[A]ssessments are crucial in finding individual students' areas of strengths and needs and knowing that every student will most likely be incredibly strong in one area, (sic) while having much need for improvement in others."

Assessment of the Gifted

The TCs identified relevant issues related to assessment of the gifted. This theme garnered the largest number of subthemes including guiding principles of assessment; types of assessment; drawbacks of assessment; use of assessment for qualifying or identification of students; and the stress which comes with assessment.

Guiding Principles of Assessment. The TCs identified several guiding principles of assessment for the classroom. Teachers' knowledge and administration of assessments were identified as guiding principles. Teachers can select assessments appropriate for the student and purpose and use assessments consistently and accurately. An additional guiding principle was assessment as a process. This involves using multiple assessments and not using tests as the only way to assess students. Observations, conferences, and student work were noted as forms of assessments to monitor student progress. Teachers should refer to the data during the teaching process to support their instructional decisions. Finally, many stated assessments should drive and support instruction. One TC stated:

> We take into account all of the factors that make them unique individuals, and we must use a variety of instructional strategies and assessment tools (including interest inventories, surveys, and self-evaluations) to help paint an accurate picture of the *whole* child.

Types of Assessment. Some of the content of this assessment course was for the TCs to learn about and administer many types of literacy assessments. They displayed their knowledge of the types of assessment in their reflections. Many cited the use of formative and summative assessments as integral and important to their teaching. When identifying students for gifted programs, the TCs named the use of IQ assessments, standardized testing, entrance assessments, and specific academic assessments as part of the process. Finally, they suggested the use of progress monitoring assessments including computer-based assessments, project-based assessments, and assessments of performance needed.

Drawbacks to Assessment. The TCs identified four areas as drawbacks to assessment. They singled out assumptions about assessment, the quality of assessment results, inappropriate uses of assessment, and issues related to those inappropriate uses as drawbacks.

Assumptions about Assessment. First, the TCs viewed the assumptions about assessment on the part of the student, teachers, peers, and families can make a difference in achievement through bias. The teacher's bias may influence the interpretation of the assessment results. Many times, the student is viewed with fault, when perhaps the assessment may have been inappropriate for the purpose. One TC pondered this when they wrote:

[t]he teachers' grading policies differed between Donovan and Noah due to a negative bias toward Donovan and 'positive' bias toward Noah. This resulted in different grades for both students, even though Noah had failing grades and should have been receiving final grades similar to Donovan (sic).

An additional identified assumption was "one test at entrance is enough to monitor progress" (sic). The TCs wondered how often students were placed into a program based on an entrance exam, and never monitored through the program to verify its status as a continued appropriate placement. Those who were special education majors noted consistent progress monitoring was required in their field but wondered if it applied to those identified as gifted.

Quality of Assessment Results. The TCs were concerned about the quality of the test results as they related to students. Many were concerned about the effect anxiety has on test results. Because of anxiety, students may not show an accurate picture of themselves, and thus not receive qualifying services. Several related their own experiences with test anxiety with comments such as "One of the issues of assessment that caught my attention in *Ungifted* and was also one that I had a strong personal connection with was Donovan's stress and anxiety he felt as he was taking his first math exam." Because of test anxiety, students may look for ways to get around assessments, fabricating illness for instance. After reading *Ungifted,* the TCs thought gifted students must feel much pressure to perform and excel in their academic courses. They surmised many gifted students might feel undue stress and anxiety and they were motivated to investigate this topic further.

Inappropriate Uses of Assessments. The TCs mentioned the inappropriate uses of assessment as a drawback. All assessments have flaws and include implicit bias. The bias can then cause the assessment to be inaccurate or unreliable. In turn, the assessment might not highlight a student's true abilities, revealing what a student cannot do as opposed to what a student can do. An example from *Ungifted* was:

> Teachers with a mindset like this can have a negative impact on their students. One of the teachers in the book, Maria Bevelaqua, felt this way toward Donovan when he arrived at the gifted school. During a staff meeting, Maria referred to Donovan as a "knuckle-dragger" (Korman, 2012, p. 66) and stated, "he's lucky he can remember his own name" (Korman, 2012 p. 64). Maria judged Donovan right off the bat and didn't even give him a chance. They did not get to know him and try to dig down deeper to determine what skills he was proficient at (sic).

Finally, schools and districts may be compared based on assessment scores. Donavan compared the schools as one TC shared:

There is a description in the book that compares Donovan's middle school, Hardcastle, to the gifted school. One example is the differences in his locker. Donovan described his locker at the gifted school as "spacious, freshly painted, its built-in power strip" (Korman, 2012, p. 211) and his Hardcastle locker as "the size of a tiny apartment mailbox. It smelled like feet." (Korman, 2012, p. 211)

Issues of Irrelevant Assessments. Several of the concerns in this section have been previously described. These include the use of assessments to compare schools and districts and test anxiety as it relates to assessment. Other issues related to assessments include the use of assessments for qualifying students and how much assessment takes away from instructional time.

Use of Assessment for Qualifying or Identification of Students. The TCs reflected on the use of assessment for qualifying or identifying students for the program. They wondered about their state's qualification/identification process. Several noted that the discussions about gifted in this course were the first time they had approached the topic. Since they did not have experience with this process, they were curious to find out more. They were concerned about the labeling of students which occurs during the assessment process and were again cognizant of using assessments appropriately.

Assessment Interferes with Instructional Time. One TC commented the assessments given should enhance and support the instruction given. If not, "the quality of learning for the student doesn't match up with the test." A point of discussion in one literature circle was how assessments should be used to alter the instruction while being judicious in giving assessments, so it does not interfere with instructional time. Another group noted there should be frequent, short "check-ups" on students as part of the instruction, as opposed to taking class time for extensive assessments. This use of progress monitoring was cited as a practice to gauge student improvement from the instruction, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction. Overall, the TCs were adamant that assessment should be purposeful, guide instruction, and be embedded within instruction as much as possible. When doing so, instructional time is maximized.

Instruction of Gifted

The last relevant issue theme concerned providing instruction to the gifted. In this area, the TCs made connections to the importance of content taught to gifted students, considerations when providing instruction, and aspects of implementation.

Content. While the TCs mentioned the academic aspects of the content, they most often stated the need for an emphasis on the affective domains. The TCs understood the characters in *Ungifted* often did not "fit in" with their age

peers. Therefore, focusing on social skills within and across age groups was important, as noted in this quote, "They (gifted) can answer obscure questions and pass tests with ease, however, they often lack specific social skills." This TC further mused, "This book has taught me that students will be more successful if they have opportunities to collaborate on projects and assignments. In this way, they would work on their social skills." The TCs cited the need to reinforce creativity for those identified as gifted. Too often they are only identified as academically gifted, while those who are more creative, in the arts, for instance, are left out of programs. A comment connecting the practice of social skills with creativity was shared as "Self-esteem will come with the creativity they create in their lives. We want our students to create their learning, while working with others" (sic). Casting a wider net of those with gifted characteristics would reach more students and nurture academics in other areas.

Considerations When Providing Instruction. The TCs pondered considerations when providing instruction to gifted students. They identified social constructs, teacher constructs, and curriculum constructs as important.

Social Constructs. After reading *Ungifted*, the TCs were especially cognizant of social constructs affecting instruction. Although they had learned of these constructs in previous foundational education courses, they identified them as important when teaching those identified as gifted. Specifically, they indicated the gap or unequal allocation of resources as a social construct affects instruction for all students. This gap might lead to the misidentification or nonidentification of students. They were concerned about how school environments affect the assessments given and the results determined. They cited the "achievement gap between rich and poor schools" as evidence that not all students are treated the same. Additionally, they suggested the gap in resources adds to the stereotypes pervasive when comparing schools. Again, they cited what they had learned in the course, noting students from "poorer" schools were less frequently placed in gifted programs. Overall, they were clear about "all students deserve all things;" they "all need a fair chance at learning."

Teacher Constructs. Teachers "are human and make mistakes" was identified as a construct that needed attention when providing instruction. Teachers should consider their influence on student learning, know their students, allow gifted students the opportunity to learn, and assist those who need to improve their social skills and self-esteem.

The TCs frequently mentioned the danger of "assumptive teaching," where the teacher's inaccurate assumptions affect the instruction provided. They conjectured assumptive teaching was due to the lack of reflection on the part of the teacher. The TCs acknowledged this as "teacher expectation equals student achievement." Students will rise to the level of expectation set by the teacher. In this view, students will only "jump as high" as the bar set by the teacher. Having

high expectations for students will increase academic gains. This was illustrated in one reflection as:

> Eventually, in the story, we see Donovan returned to his old school after being removed from the gifted program that he was mistakenly transferred into. After returning to the ordinary public school, Donovan's grades thrived with straight A's and everything felt so easy after his time at the gifted academy (Korman, 2012, p. 232). The reason for that is when the achievement is set much higher for students, they work harder and learn more even when they don't reach the goals (sic).

The TCs cited the need to use assessment to guide instruction. They should not ignore the information valid assessments provide, as they will help the teacher determine the strengths and areas for improvement for each student. Teachers should keep this guiding principle in mind while teaching to the standards for the grade level. Teachers should use assessments to alter instruction, and then use the alteration to help all learners meet the required learning targets and standards.

Aspects of Implementation. The TCs wrote extensively about the need for differentiated instruction when teaching the gifted. Although they had learned much about differentiated instruction in other courses, the TCs acknowledged differentiation should take place in the classroom, regardless of the academic levels of the students. In this way, "all students will be taught to their potential." This differentiation could include considerations of modifications and accommodations, how students are grouped for instruction, or if "pull-out" or "push-in" instruction was used. No matter the form of differentiation, the gifted should be nurtured in their interactions with others.

Modifications and Accommodations. One TC cited their knowledge in this area from a special education course taken. They addressed this by writing "the need to assess students with exceptionalities, both students performing below grade level or with learning disabilities, and gifted students is by using accommodations and modifications." They further commented

> This would have applied in this story for assessments or for assignments for Donovan when he told his teachers he had learning disabilities like Dyslexia, ADD, and OCD. But they did not even double-check to make sure he was being honest about having those conditions and looking into his IEP (sic).

It was noted students could be Twice Exceptional (2E), meaning they could be gifted and have an exceptionality identified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (https://sites.ed.gov/idea/), such as a learning disability. Modifications and accommodations need to be made for not only these students, "but all students" so they can succeed. One commented this was a new concept for her when they wrote, "I was also able to consider insights of

assessment that I had not considered before, such as a student acquiring both gifted and learning disabilities."

Grouping for Instruction. The TCs frequently cited the strengths and needs of all students. Therefore, knowing one's students affects instructional delivery. Grouping students is one way of delivering instruction. A comment shared was "[t]hat students know their grouping, whether it is high or low. Donovan, for example, knew he didn't belong in the gifted program." Flexible grouping within instruction was deemed appropriate. Teachers could group students for short-term projects, to practice social skills, to provide additional instruction, or based on need. The TCs were concerned the groups maintain flexibility, and not be static. They did not want the students to be like Donavan in knowing he did not belong in the gifted group.

Pull-Out or Push-In Delivery. Related to the issue of grouping was the model of delivery for gifted programs. The students in *Ungifted* attended a variation of a pull-out model, meaning they attended a separate school. One commented:

> Donovan had to go to a different school when he was mistakenly put into the Gifted Academy rather than taking different classes in the same building. Over the country, students are being put into different schools rather than different classes to focus on their abilities.

> Others questioned the wisdom of this because of a construct they learned from another class. This TC wrote, "Elementary gifted students discussed being new, missing or losing friends from the general education program, and being mocked by students outside of the gifted class." One shared more deeply:

> Throughout the book, I was constantly confronted with the idea that these students should not have been separated out of general education classrooms. Chloe was always striving to be "normal" and if she were mainstreamed, she might have had a better chance to actualize this dream. Noah was always trying to fail so that he could be with other students and not placed under as much pressure as he was. A quote from the book illustrates the reason for mainstreaming perfectly, "but all the IQ points in the world wouldn't help her in a situation like this" (Korman, 2012, p. 134). There are many times in life when a person's IQ score will not help and for that reason, I believe that mainstreaming is key (sic).

> Another discussed this delivery model when they wrote:

> Pulling out versus pushing in was a topic of discussion in class, but instead of pulling out, students could get help while "pushing in" This new model could be beneficial in the aspect that gifted students would not have to leave their environment for more help.

It seems the TCs recognized some of the effects of separating students for instruction. For the most part, they felt the gifted students should be

included in the general education program, just as students with disabilities are. Separating gifted students might not be the least restrictive environment.

Implications for Teaching

Another question in the reflective essay prompted the TCs to consider the implications of their new knowledge for their teaching. They identified three broad theme areas including expanded knowledge about teaching the gifted; expanded knowledge of classroom processes; and expanded knowledge of ideas for teaching.

Expanded Knowledge about Teaching the Gifted

The TCs were forthcoming with their increased knowledge of teaching the gifted. Here they cited the expanded knowledge of programs, of students identified as gifted, of teacher development and behaviors.

Knowledge of Programs. One TC stated they had better insight into gifted programs after reading *Ungifted.* They wrote:

> Another insight I gained from reading *Ungifted* involved learning more about gifted programs and the effects they have on students and educators. Since I have not had any experience working with gifted programs, it was intriguing to hear about the differences between a gifted school and a regular public middle school.

However, many noted the narrow view of what "gifted" is. A comment to support this was, "In order to be placed in a gifted program, assessment should not be limited to specific content areas such as math, science, and literacy. Gifted programs need to address students of all gifted areas, such as dance or music" (sic). It was noted while gifted programs might not be appropriate for all students, as some have suggested, "divergent" and "higher level" thinking, a hallmark of gifted education, should be used in all classrooms, regardless of ability level.

Knowledge of Students. The TCs stated they had expanded their knowledge of students who were identified as gifted. They felt students should be placed into programs based on more than a written test, and academics should not always be the determiner of how "smart" someone is. Creativity, problem-solving, and social skills could be considered areas of giftedness. In Donavan's case he was noted as:

> [g]ifted in problem-solving, for example when he asked his sister to become the class project and save the class from summer school. Donovan was also gifted in standing up for others, such as when the Daniels were

rude to his friends at the dance. Donovan was gifted in positivity and friendship.

They identified gifted students could suffer from low self-esteem, regardless of their strengths and weaknesses. However, they had not given much thought to how gifted perceive themselves. They had assumed because the students were gifted, they did not have other "problems." They realized gifted students are on developmental progression just as other students.

Knowledge of Teacher Development. The TCs expanded their knowledge of their development through this class engagement. Across the data, the TCs noted the importance of reflective practice, "Reflective practice allows educators to evaluate if instructions are meeting the needs of individuals in the classroom and where differentiation can occur" (sic). The teachers in *Ungifted* should have used reflective practice as illustrated in this comment, "By becoming reflective practitioners, Donovan's teachers would have evaluated him in the mode he learns best, what he already knows, what information he is ready to gain and watch for academic growth." Reflective practitioners, they stated, are better able to meet the needs of the students. Finally, the use of reflective practice would help the TCs to avoid the assumptive teaching highlighted earlier.

Knowledge of Teacher Behaviors. The TCs addressed how their behaviors affect the teaching of the gifted. As highlighted previously, they wanted to set high expectations for their students, because "setting low expectations leads to a lack of learning." When setting high expectations, they also want to create a growth mindset, because "teachers won't be successful in the classroom if they don't instill that in their students." They suggested the growth mindset would help teachers avoid assumptive teaching. Finally, the TCs cited the importance of their role in creating a "family" in the classroom. The values of this family included supporting a "diverse group of learners, emotionally, physically, mentally, and academically."

Classroom Processes

An additional area deemed relevant was classroom processes. The TCs expanded their knowledge of professional discourse and an area they labeled as "what not to do" when implementing classroom processes.

Expanded Knowledge of Professional Discourse. Because they participated in literature circles, the TCs reflected on professional discourse. They stated they were able to express their thoughts and feelings about the topics which arose during conversations safely and respectfully. For example, comments such as "we had many discussions on high stakes tests and how they are a misrepresentation of students' actual abilities because they are only one data set of a student's abilities" were representative of the topics within the literature

discussion groups. During these conversations, they were able to think critically about the multiple perspectives of Donavan's story, and the new insights and connections they made between the novel and the course content. They felt their expanded knowledge of professional discourse added to their development as teachers.

What Not to Do. "What not to do" was also highlighted as a process. Many of the TCs responded with examples of what they would not do in their teaching. They included examples of "how not to teach" when teachers only focus on academics. They cited wanting to teach "the whole child." They cited not ignoring the bullying which happens not just to gifted students, but all students. They were adamant about "how not to assess, citing such examples as not using "one assessment to determine a student's full range of abilities," and not using the assessment data to drive instruction for all students.

They cited instances of how they would not organize their classrooms. As previously shared, they were concerned with the use of push-in or pull-out programs. Overall, they wanted all students to be part of their classroom family. They stated the desire to create inclusive classrooms as opposed to those that separate students. Finally, many quoted instances of how they would not treat their students with labels and poor social interactions. Labels were seen to encourage a "one size fits all" mentality in the classroom. These labels create stereotypes, an oppositional view of each student as an individual who is part of a classroom community. These processes appear to inform their deeper ideas about teaching.

Ideas of Teaching

A final theme identified in the data were ideas for teaching. The TCs solidified ideas for working with students; additional strategies or models of teaching; and the importance of curriculum.

Students

The TCs highlighted their need to focus on students when teaching. They stated the need to acknowledge the differences between their students and celebrate those as strengths, because "they all have potential." One cautioned to "[n]ot rely primarily on technology, but to follow the data that is shown in the classroom day in and out and gather the data needed to get the student in their appropriate level." A different TC stated, "they are unique individuals with voices that deserve to be heard, strengths that should be leveraged, and points of view that should be valued and nurtured." In their view, this acknowledgment can help teachers differentiate instruction for gifted students.

Another highlighted practice was strengthening the social skills or affective aspects of the gifted. The gifted curriculum often focuses on the

cognitive domain. When planning for instruction, both the cognitive and affective domains should be equally addressed. However, topics of the intersection of inclusive classrooms, nurturing student development, and valuing students as individuals with strengths and needs were cited as ways to support the affective domain of those identified as gifted.

Strategies/Models of Teaching

The TCs expanded upon their knowledge of strategies and models of teaching used in the discussion process and by the teachers in *Ungifted.* Many commented on the helpfulness of the use of "stop and jots" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017) in their preparation for the literature discussions. They appreciated how their literature discussion groups connected their notes from the novel to the course readings about teaching the gifted. For instance, the strategies might be used in their classrooms based on this experience:

> The literature circle approach to reading this novel was very helpful and intriguing. I found myself constantly being interested in what was happening next and I was paying attention to the story more than if I had not done this strategy. This strategy forces you to concentrate on the reading and really dive in and put yourself into the shoes of the characters. In my future classroom, I could see myself using this strategy because it is hands-on and engaging. The students will actually be writing down their thoughts which will take them to a new level on Bloom's chart because they will be questioning and thinking about their thought processes. Even for myself as a college student, I found this strategy to be helpful and assist me in finding main ideas and key points throughout the story (sic).

They noted the use of "stop and jots" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017) provided them with opportunities to engage in participatory, hands-on processes. "The stop and jots allowed me to participate in a comprehension strategy as a student, which was beneficial to see the kinds of data I can collect as a teacher from my students who use this strategy." The use of the literature circle with the stop and jots was a powerful combination of two strategies for themselves as teachers who participate in professional discourse but also used by their students. These types of practices enhanced differentiation between students.

Curriculum

A final area the TCs highlighted as an important consideration in teaching was to address the curriculum. A well-rounded curriculum is needed for teaching gifted because "[t]hat is something they deserve as the purpose of education is to create well-rounded citizens." One cited Gipe (2013) when writing "it is possible for

teachers to expand their instructional methods to provide a variety of activities within their literacy curriculum that link learning to as many intelligences and learning styles as possible" (p. 24) (sic). This well-rounded curriculum would benefit from the inclusion of creativity. Doing so would enhance the teaching of the "whole child."

Discussion

The research questions presented in this study were gleaned from the prompts for a reflective essay assigned in a literacy assessment course. The data presented here are based upon the TCs' reflections of relevant issues of giftedness and assessment, as well as the implications those issues might have upon their teaching. They arrived at their reflections through participation in a literature circle of *Ungifted* (Korman, 2012).

The TCs addressed the research questions through relevant themes. They expanded their awareness of the needs of those identified as gifted. One broad theme was the *development of an awareness of the affective needs of students who are gifted*. TCs noticed a neglect of emotional support in the novel when, in fact, the affective domain should be an equal element in gifted programs, in tandem with the cognitive domain. In the novel *Ungifted*, the assessment of the affective elements of the students is not addressed, yet the reader is made aware of the emotional distress each character is experiencing (Korman, 2012).

The TCs developed an awareness of the *neglect of creativity, expression, and social skill development in the education of the gifted*. With the realization of these needs, TCs reflected on the fact that gifted students would benefit from a more inclusive model of learning, such as the push-in model. The TCs expressed an understanding of the need to focus on social skill development and support of the affective domains as a critical component in the developmental milestones of gifted students. This included a stronger awareness of the scope of the 'whole child' mindset when working with gifted students. Peak performance within cognitive domains is not the sole indicator of giftedness. TCs developed a strong understanding that there is more to 'assessment' than just the academic/cognitive side; affective development is equally important.

A further aspect of awareness developed in the TCs was *the cross-section of knowledge learned while in their Teacher Preparation Program*. Many themes indicated a deeper understanding of concepts due to the development of background knowledge in other classes. Cross-course knowledge included assumptive teaching, use of accommodations and modifications, inclusive practices, models of teaching (e.g., the 'push-in' model), and use of data collection to benchmark the progress of student performance. This allowed the TCs to see the connection of the development of a teacher candidate across multiple

platforms, allowing their knowledge to blend rather than seeing their learning as segregated by topic. For instance, the use of accommodations and modifications is a strong focus in special education teacher preparation courses. The TCs were able to see how this practice can be applied to gifted students.

Multiple TCs *expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity to apply the use of the strategies learned during the engagement of this assignment.* The use of literature circles and "stop and jots," are strategies TCs are eager to use in their future classrooms. Many TCs not only learned a reflective practice through adaptation and application but also learned strategies they can demonstrate and employ with their future students.

The use of a 'tween novel' to support and *develop an awareness of how to support gifted learners provoked thought, connection, and the use of background knowledge to create informed reflection.* TCs developed a stronger understanding of how narrow assessment can be if not used appropriately, effectively, and equally toward multiple domains. The TCs experienced a sense of growth by being informed, alert, aware, empathetic, and prepared when working with students who are gifted.

The findings in this study add to the scant research available about the use of literature circles in undergraduate teacher education. These findings illuminate how TCs can develop a broader understanding of working with diverse populations by participating in a literature discussion with a "tween novel." Additionally, the TCs can integrate concepts from various courses, become more introspective, apply the ideas discussed in their future teaching, and develop professional dispositions. They came to a deeper understanding of the content within this course, specifically teaching those identified as gifted and issues related to assessment.

Limitations

There are limitations inherent in all studies. For this study, the TCs attended the same university and were enrolled in a literacy assessment course as part of their minor program. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to a larger population. Second, the TCs were enrolled in this course during the Winter Quarter of three consecutive years. The data were reflective of the circumstances of the teaching within a particular quarter. Finally, because the participants represented several majors and were at different points in their programs, they did not have the same background knowledge upon entering the course. For example, special education majors have learner outcomes that address gifted and talented traits within their program. Those special education majors who participated in this study may have had more in-depth knowledge of gifted education. Regardless of the limitations, the data describe the TCs' reflections on giftedness. This

strengthens the interpretive validity that Maxwell (1992) defined as the perceived meaning of the actions, thoughts, and behaviors of the participants. As a result, the findings may augment the guidance of reflection for those participating in a literature discussion group with a tween novel about giftedness.

Conclusion

Literature circles with a "tween novel" can be used in other teacher education courses perhaps with similar findings. For instance, *Out of My Mind* (Draper, 2012) or *Show Me a Sign* (LeZotte, 2021) might be used in an introductory special education course. *The Year of Miss Agnes* (Hill, 2000) could be discussed in a literacy methods course, while *The Infinite Lives of Maisy Day* (Edge, 2019) would align with concepts presented in a science methods course. To make cross-course connections, teacher education programs could provide a literature circle in each of their methods courses, thus reinforcing the understanding gained with the use of this practice.

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